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**In a Galaxy Far, Far AwRy  
The Story So Far: Ice Cream  
Headache**

**Liam Gibbs**

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## ***THE STORY SO FAR...***

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**Issue 1: *Serial Fiction Sideshow***, available in the hearts of one and all.

**Issue 2: *Home Sweet Home Invasion***, available in the hearts of one and all.

**Issue 3: *Technophobia***, available in the h—you're starting to see a pattern here, aren't you?

**Issue 4: *Armageddon Trigger Finger***, available in...hey... your heart. And one and all's too.

**Issue 5: *The Genetic Equation***, available blah blah blah.

**Issue 6: *Power Tool***, not available. Just kidding. Totally available.

**Issue 7: *The Lesser of Two Egos***, coming sometime.

**Issue 0: *The Story So Far***, you know the drill.

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## ***OTHER BLASPHEMIES OF ART***

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***Not So Superpowered***, available at [tiny.cc/nssuperpowered](http://tiny.cc/nssuperpowered)

***Three Flash Fictions***, available upon request from the author

High school love notes to no one in particular



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## ***ICE CREAM HEADACHE IN "THIS THING I PUT ICE CREAM HEADACHE IN"***

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September 14, 9084. 11:18 p.m. (Galactic Standard Time).

Chilly out here. Wet, too. But not much to this job. She'd done it a few dozen times before. Well, not successfully, but she'd tried it. She didn't need money. Okay, she lied: she needed money. Rather, her younger sister, Gabby, needed money. More specifically, Gabby's most recent gambling debtors wanted money, so therefore her sister's life depended on the mo—

Never mind. The point of those ridiculous logic gymnastics was to say Hailie didn't like money. She hated the stuff. But she broke into these places to attempt saving her sister's life from—how did they put it?—the “sharkest loan sharks this side of a feeding frenzy.” And she ate dinner in them. She liked dinners in swanky carpeted places, maybe because her apartment was carpeted in dead bugs. She remembered her fork this time.

“It's fourteen thousand,” the creaky voice on the gabber had said last night. How a communication device so tiny it sat in her ear could give her not-so-tiny stress confounded her. It made the voice sound official, like a news anchor from an old-fashioned radio show. But one with a deviated septum. Hard to

threaten when your breathing gurgled. The voice had been harassing her for the last few two months, but last night it had made the ominous threat. “Or it’s Gabriella’s life.” This was Gabby’s last shot.

“Her life?” Hailie had been pacing, but she’d stopped short. “It was kneecaps before. What happened to kneecaps?”

“It’s been too long now. We’ve moved up to life. So, fourteen thousand by tomorrow or her life.” He cleared his throat. “Fourteen thousand *moolahs*.”

What the—In her chalky, nippy apartment, Hailie spread her hands. “Of course, moolahs. This isn’t prehistory. I’m not getting you fourteen thousand livestock.”

“What’s a livestock? Is that a better version of a stock? Have we been dealing in dead stocks this whole time? Is there a version for bonds? Can I get livestock *and* livebonds?” The voice grew louder. “Hey, Ed, is it possible to get fourteen thousand livest—”

“You’re absurd.” The other voice. Ed, or Second Voice, always sounded like a skater punk decorated with acne, one who thought wearing his hat backward was high fashion and got angry hearing otherwise. His words sounded businesslike, but his voice screeched to add to the prepubescent impression. Maybe kids ran things in Murder Land.

“Never mind about the livestock.” With impeccable pronunciation, First Voice gurgled those words over nasal breathing. They percolated through Hailie’s gabber. “We know you’ve started breaking into banks to help pay Gabriella’s debt.

But you never get the money. Just get the money. *Just get us our money.* Or Gabriella doesn't live to see tomorrow." Calendar familiarity said tomorrow was now today, and just remembering this made Hailie's heart jumpstart and suffocate her in shallow breathing. "We have to go now. We're expecting pizza."

That was it. That was the conversation that had Hailie breaking in ahead of schedule. She'd cased this bank for a week now, rehearsed every move, every day wet and every day a new eye sore. She had expected a few more nights of prep. But last night's call now forced her here for the real job. And at night in the middle of a cricket concert, because she realized how weird she looked hiding in a bush in broad daylight. Try explaining *that* to the cops. Sometimes you learn things the hard way. Several times. Didn't go over well.

Hidden in damp bushes, Hailie MacReynolds watched the bank across the street and its lone occupant. At least she watched when stabs of wind didn't whack wet leaves into her eye. Such as now. Crocking wind. Also crocking allergies, she realized as she fought back a feathering sneeze. Ragweed season was in high-attack mode.

Gabby had run gambling debts before, but she'd always paid them off. This one, though, which she'd made two months ago, got her in over her head. So Hailie had started attempting bank robberies. And, whenever she attempted one, she always intended to steal just enough to get Gabby out of debt, get those sister-threatening, pizza-loving Voices off her back. But she always lost her nerve during the break-in and came away with

nothing, thanks to thumbprint readers that could track the money back to her. Still, the threats kept growing fiercer. And now the deadline menaced closer.

And, since yesterday, more than her kneecaps were at stake. But this time, she had Mineos Gaggard, the skin-peeling financial manager in charge of one or another tax-free scheme. Gaggard was Hailie's key.

She wiped rain patter and something more viscous than rain patter off her nose. Breaking into banks was better at night, because now she wouldn't have to talk her way out of opening an interest-bearing checking account. Whatever that was. She barely knew what interested people about a *regular*-bearing checking account.

Anyway, hiding across from the bank every chilly night this week was enough. She knew already what to expect from these jobs. From all those heist movies she'd watched—*Manic Money Raid*, *Hundreds o' Hundreds*, *Heist*, *The Empire Heists Back*, that *Just for Laughs* video—she learned to rob banks either during closing hours with no one around or during opening hours with everyone around. Heist movies gave polarizing recommendations.

But Hailie didn't like those extremes. Either there was too much of a crowd or there was no one to use her hyperability on. Yeah, Hailie had a hyperability: freezing brains. She tricked the part of the brain that registered taste into thinking it tasted ice cream. Sounded awesome until you realized it registered as a brain freeze instead of just a leisurely snack. So she couldn't



break into banks without someone to open the front door for her. It wasn't a chivalry thing, it was a...Actually, it was a chivalry thing. Maybe. Okay, fifty-fifty.

For the last week, she'd arrived at the end of the banking day when the customers were gone, and only one or two brownnosing, overachieving money nerds skulked in the dimly lit final hours. Despite never having succeeded in her robberies, her hyperability had earned her a media name: Ice Cream Headache. She liked it. Why not keep it? It sounded better than the nickname she'd given herself. Soft Serve Sassmouth might score points for alliteration but not for threatening anyone.

She wiped more drizzle from her eyes. Today's victim, if the week's shift schedule repeated, was the bluish-grayish, owl-nosed Gaggard, who always worked late. A blue-skinned Trioxidillian, he wore a suit better fitted for Virillians, snakelike creatures who tended to stand taller with more aggressive postures. Their clothes were also more appropriate for their scales rather than a Trioxidillian's hairless skin.

They also didn't smell like old couches left in the rain, like Gaggard did, from what Hailie heard. She'd only watched him from distances, never close enough to him to verify his odor. How did old couches left in the rain smell? She didn't know. She didn't want to know, because if they smelled like anything else left in the rain, they smelled like dingy bread and lingered on your tongue. That caused sneezing fits—*harder* sneezing fits—and Hailie hated spraying snot on her outfits. She still had stains all over these sleeves. Ew. Also, downhearted

sniffle. These clothes hugged her comfortably.

She'd adopted a media outfit lately to go with her name. Blue and white plastic icicles dangled from the sleeves and leggings of this blue, white, and black impact suit. Her outfit proclaimed, "Let me in!" People obeyed the outfit, especially with the icicles clinking against each other. Yeah. She looked goooooood in this thing.

Okay, coast was clear. She grabbed her dinner bag—the one that proclaimed "Food" in bright, white letters—bounded across the street, timed it so she'd—oof—hit a median, trip, and land face first in dirt.

Sigh. Nice move.

She picked herself up, grabbed her randomized dinner bag, spat the flowerbed taste out of her mouth, bounded across the rest of the street—oh, for crock's sake, now her shoe wa— Didn't anybody pick up after their dogs anymore? She examined the turd, the size of a—or maybe their hippos?

Reached the bank. In front of it, lo and behold, a couch awaited garbage pickup. Now she knew: couches in the rain smelled like moldy *flannel*. She found a bay window half obscured by a banner ad for...Dentures and Diarrhea Retirement Planning? She shuddered. And another for Grenade Jenga, which Hailie remarked was the more ordinary of the two ads.

Motionless now, she smelled the crap on her shoe and wished she were breaking into a bakery. Except Hippo Poop Bakery. Some places shouldn't stay in business.

Gaggard usually strolled a couple final rounds after closing for the night and heading home to his TV dinner/lonely man's cuisine that tasted like something from the aforementioned bakery. So she waited here on this spongy grass for him to stroll past—

And there he strolled. Literally. It was weird. Hailie grinned, putting on display each of her teeth. Even the one she'd chipped on that bad lobster. Pissing Crustacean Carcass outlet. Never eat seafood from a delivery joint. Her tooth still blazed coldly whenever she ran her tongue over it.

Hailie knocked on the window. Gaggard looked up from his wafer-thin datasheet computer, his datasheet, skin flakes shaking off him. He froze at Hailie's toothy smile. Yup. He knew whom he dealt with. His expression withered, and he dropped his datasheet, which immediately deactivated with a "See you in five minutes, computer junkie." It curled into a scroll and fluttered to the carpet.

Hailie funneled her voice in both hands. "Meet me at the front door so you can let me in." Crap, she'd forgotten her fork after all, hadn't she? And she'd brought lasagna. How could you eat lasagna with no pissing fork? Now it'd get all over her hands and her sleeves—and she'd just washed this thing! Gaggard better have a napkin. Without skin flakes. The risks she took for her sister. Sigh, Gabby. Sigh.

Gaggard didn't react at first. His brain took a second to rev up to the reality that he'd soon taste garlic ice cream in the worst way possible. Nobody liked garlic ice cream except

drunkards and tree huggers. He nodded stiffly, choking on the saliva gathering under his tongue but not the saliva gathering on his chin. Sometimes Hailie's victims wet themselves a little. Not this time. Though the toddler in Hailie giggled at that—uncontrollably—eye contact still felt awkward, which she'd need when she asked for that napkin.

Hailie dogged him along the panel-windowed hall to the front doors where his voice gave a muffled, “C-control, acknowledge-dge. Un-n-lock front doors-s.” Here was where he tinkled. Really, grown man? Just once Hailie wanted to bark orders at someone eye to eye. Now a damp spot splotched Gaggard's seal-brown pants. Leave the seals alone! Nice crease in the legs, though.

Gaggard shuddered as the latent-technology doors faded with a *ding*, dispersed into computer memory, same as all l-tech when commanded. Time to play the part. Properly this time, too, not like before when she kept tripping on her own feet. She elongated her *s* sounds, like a snake speaking. It gave her an icier tone. Injected an extra oomph to her persona and left people uneasy.

Hailie entered through the opening the double l-doors left. She breathed relief—“Thanks sssso much for letting me in”—watched Gaggard's glasses slide down his clammy nose—“It'ssss cold and damp outssside”—which he pushed back up—“and you can't imagine what that doesss to my hair”—but who wore glasses these days, what with eye-correction technology and gene resetting—“but, you know”—still, they

were fashionable, and these banker types liked looking smart. So there was that.

Chilly in here, with the ventilation against the rain still slicking Hailie's skin. And, away from that couch and the musty precipitation, she doubly smelled the poop that was now a legitimate part of her shoe. She scuffed it on the carpet.

Hailie caught a small whiff of Gaggard. Not so much like old couches in the rain, but—she pursed her lips—upholstery with grape-juice stains? She was in the ballpark. Maybe a touch of vinegar...ooooorrrrrrr old lemon. Definitely a salad dressing ingredient.

The l-doors appeared—and some voice rang-danged, “Howdy, cowpokes!” Holy crocking crock! Shock flared through Hailie. The cowgirl spoke so loudly the furniture still shook. “Welcome to the First Bank of Mad Wild Awesome, where we’re a-handin’ out free house mortgages when you open a planet mortgage. But they’re a-going fast, pardner. Only six left in the Taurus Constellation, so a...Well, ain’t that a hoot. All sold. Never mind, city slickers.” *Click.*

Hailie gawked with her eyes but not her jaw. “You installed a cowgirl haunt-control mod?” Haunt controls were the voice-activation software that controlled locations, so called because they automated with such effectiveness that they made things seem haunted.

“It’s f-for the hamsters-s.” Gaggard swallowed audibly. “We’ve o-o-opened more business l-loans s-since installing it.”

What? “How many hamsters open up—Why are hams—

Never mind. I'm so positively littered with questions that my brain is congealing." Hailie swiped her hands in the air, her dinner bag swaying. "Please stop opening business loans for hamsters."

"The legal m-minimum age is four y-years."

"Don't"—Hailie reasserted with a pointing finger, icicles jangling on her sleeve—"open mortgages for hamsters. Not even the orange ones. They eat newspaper, and their breath smells gross." She tapped her finger on Gaggard's collarbone. Bad move. She wiped Gaggard's dry skin off her fingertip. Ugh.

"Now, let's go to the safe. I need to make a withdrawal." Really, she wanted to grind ricotta into the rug back there. This place had refused her a line of credit, so revenge sparked her mind.

"Not-t a-again." Gaggard slithered back. "This bank has been robbed thrice this year."

"Look, I'm not here to make a huge withdrawal. And, more important, nobody uses the word *thrice*." Hailie prodded Gaggard toward the back with nothing but a stick she'd found outside. She wished it were a rusty spring from that rain-drenched couch. Comedic effect.

Gaggard was eager to go. He had something to avoid other than a decent barber he was already avoiding: Hailie's ice-cream rage. Judging from his bouncing belly, he was probably all too familiar with how ice cream betrayed you.

"Th-that smell," Gaggard trembled out. "Hippo?"

"Never mind that." Hailie thought only she smelled it.

She was right, though: a hippo had dropped logs outside.

“B-b-before you t-try anything, know th-that there are three p-people upstairs.” Gaggard stumbled toward the back. His eyes refused to contact Hailie’s. He was a bad liar. “We’re building a high-profile financial model on some security venture. A client needs to review it early tomorrow morning.” A really bad liar.

Hailie chuckled. “Right. Financial models. Keep marching.”

They arrived in the back. Felt like a museum here, but a gigantic safe, complete with an equally gigantic lock wheel, directed attention. Safes opened via haunt-control commands, so Hailie wasn’t sure why the lock wheel, but whatever. Inside the safe hid safety-deposit boxes, luxury goods, important documents, probably precious metals...maybe important hamster keepsakes such as deeds to hamster-tube homes? Smelled like a hamster tube in here, overpowering the hippo tube Hailie had stepped in outside. The cleaning staff deserved to be replaced for not deodorizing this place.

Hailie set her dinner bag on a countertop. She felt slithery aversion to the wall safe. She bit her lip. She knew the safe wasn’t money, but behind it hid money. When Hailie was growing up, her parents bickered over money. Nonstop. The MacReynolds’ weren’t a poor family. Not rich, but not wearing potato sacks. But her parents argued so thunderously sometimes that Hailie and Gabby covered their ears and squirmed away outside or under bedsheets. Sometimes her parents tricked them

into these money talks by calling them special family dinners. Well, sometimes dinner was involved. Okay, food fights. A fight inside a fight, like Russian nesting dolls. Consequently, Hailie learned to fear money, to hate it. But the MacReynolds' needed it: for food, for housing, for feeding the vermin in the walls so they wouldn't shiv visiting social workers. So Hailie had learned to also appreciate money. But Gabby had gone the other way, coerced to abuse money. And now Hailie needed Gaggard's help to bail Gabby out. When Gabby got—

“S-s-so...” Gaggard shook—

“Hey.” Hailie speared the air with a finger, almost gouged Gaggard's nose. “I'm recalling. Please don't interrupt.”

Anyway, when Gabby got caught in the undertow of her gambling with this latest wager with the Voices, Hailie started breaking in to banks. She'd always been stuck, helpless to finish the job. But not this time. Not with Gaggard. With Gaggard, she didn't need to go through thumbprint readers. She wouldn't be tracked.

Hailie lowered her finger. “Okay, all done.”

“S-s-so...” Gaggard eked out that word on vinegary breath. Skin flakes garnished the coarse carpet. “If-f you don't steal m-money, why are y-you here?”

To eat.

“To eat.” Crap. Wrong line. Quick, time for a recovery line. “Hamsters.” That wasn't it.

She pinched the skin between her eyebrows. “Look, I'll level with you. I hate money. But I need it. I just haven't been



able to take it. Not yet. Why? Money is traceable. I can't make a withdrawal using a thumbprint reader, or I'm as good as convicted. And gold is too heavy. Doesn't mean I haven't tried." She shrugged. "Also, I have nothing better to do on a Friday night.

"I heard you're a bit shady. You know how to make untraced transactions, so you're going to help me. I need fourteen thousand moolahs, and you're just the man with the access to get it for me."

"Well, shine my shoes and upgrade my subscription to the full version for only a few moolahs in the next thirty minutes. Cattleman Gaggard, two unlisted entities just moseyed through the front doors you forgot to lock. Yeehaw!"

Hailie and Gaggard reeled at the voice cowpoking through the overhead speaker. Two people just mosey—revise that. Two people just entered the bank? Yes, Hailie heard the faint *ding*. She glanced toward the foyer l-doors, concealed behind a hall that cornered up ahead. Something cracked. Hailie's elbow.

Something else cracked. Not Hailie's elbow. Muffled voices spread into the back room, but Hailie couldn't understand a thing except *m*, *g*, and *b* sounds, like gophers speaking over public-transit speakers. Maybe the voices said, "Mggbgmmgbbg." A new laundry detergent?

Gaggard trembled harder, sprinkling dandruff off his hairless scalp. His cracked lips barely formed words, but he managed to suck in enough air to say, "C-c-control, ack-n-

nowledge. O-open v-v-viewscreen. Display l-location f-f-f-f’—would he ever get out that f?—“f-f-foyer.” Good boy.

A thin display monitor emerged from nowhere, the cowgirl mod yodelay-ee-hoo-ing and robbing Hailie of hearing. Hailie had a new worst enemy. After all these years, the DMV was unseated. The mod’s rambunctious shrill subsided into the whipping of what Hailie guessed was a lasso, and what the crock attracted hamsters to this? Must be a rodent thing, no offense to the rodent population.

The viewscreen trumpeted its appearance. It was an old design, programmed with ancient rendering software. Hailie was no expert, but she knew it used ancient software when its welcoming screen said, “Please kill me,” and the copyright date had fewer than eight Roman numerals. Finally, it coughed up an image, grainy at first but resolving to a full-color performance of two figures traipsing into the middle of the foyer. Hailie didn’t like this heist movie.

One figure was Terran, and the other wore a mechanized body suit. A glowing and buzzing laser rope leashed the Terran, which produced in Hailie’s mind an owner/pet relationship, if the pet were a starved mongrel the owner kicked around. A lot. A *lot* a lot.

The mongrel’s skin looked like something between a volcanic eruption and an earthquake, other natural disasters scribbled along his limbs. Knobs of his spine ridged his shirtless back. Open sores seeped goo, and varicose veins spidered around like the aftermath of tectonic plates ripping scorched

farmland asunder. Barefoot, he wore only frayed shorts a few washes too old. The mongrel's skin looked several shades more purple/red/orange/burnt sienna—if *burnt* was literal—than anything Hailie had ever seen. Crayola had some colors to invent off this guy's complexion.

The owner stood tall but with blundering steps, as if he tried to hide a sickliness. A viewport in the helmet was big enough to reveal a face from forehead to chin, but despite a pulsing green light inside, the face was still swathed in shadow. Two ridged oxygen hoses piped up from the chest to the nose, and Hailie heard it *click-wheeze-click-wheeze* like a breathing-assistance machine. On fat boots, the owner carried himself with pomposity inside that dark-green armor that swanked a yellow ridge at the brow. A phlegmy cough added that musical tone. Was he fighting off a virus? He strode like an ailing king among his subjects or Hailie's ninth-grade math teacher among detention-room deviants.

A sickly warrior, a diseased mongrel, and a banker with a skin condition. Did everyone here suffer from a bizarre health condition? This bank should relocate next door to a hospital.

A hoarse voice roared out. Hailie assumed it belonged to the suited warrior, authoritative but bubbly in phlegm and raspy panting. "Mr. Gaggard, your unholy presence is required out front." The owner capped this off with a foamy cough, as if that bellow were too taxing. He by now had reached the clerk desk and found a bowl of candy sitting there. He rummaged a glove in and then seemed to realize the candy wasn't going anywhere

with that helmet on. “Do you smell hippo stool?” What? From out there?

Steps jittery, the mongrel weaved through the stanchions of the bank’s triage maze. The empty triage maze. Yes, he still obeyed line etiquette. The owner yanked back the leash, having none of that. Double none of that, since the force of his yank suggested he was as indignant as Hailie’s ninth-grade math teacher.

Hailie wanted to squirm into the safe behind her, but she’d probably make noise among all those hamster tubes.

“W-w-who are those two?” Gaggard struggled out those words as the mongrel clattered into some stanchions.

“How should I know? They came for *you*. I’m still trying to figure out if I have unresolved issues with my education.” A cold quiver traveled through Hailie when she heard and watched a table crash: the owner threw it aside like Hailie’s ninth-grade math teacher threw desks aside in fits of rage. “Okay, figured it out.”

As a kid, Hailie had lived next door to a family with a mangy Chihuahua. Annoying runt. All Chihuahuas were annoying unless they wore sombreros. Then they were hilarious. But this Chihuahua didn’t. It also rolled around in dead birds. Hailie would practice her hyperability on this windup toy of a pet. Peanut-butter ripple was its favorite, so she’d slam it with rocky road, peanut-butter ripple’s opposite according to a multimillion-moolah study that could have instead cured cancer. The mongrel here in the destructed foyer reminded Hailie of

that dog, how this shriveled ragdoll with thin and splotchy hair cowered whenever the owner budged. But the mongrel... *enjoyed*...the abuse. He smirked at the abuse.

An air pocket bubbled in Hailie's throat, like food rising back out. She stumbled into the wall safe, and an edge poked her back through her outfit's impact material. She should have stayed home to watch *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Season 8002 debuted tonight. This was the season where Frank did something ugly and immoral. Instead she was here, bailing Gabby out and watching this armored goon and his dog destroy a bank lobby.

Gaggard squinted a closer look at the two in the weird abusive relationship. He gasped, his eyes gasped, his butt gasped. "I don't care who they are, I have to go, I have to go"—the chubby Trioxidillian with the blue skin pallor tinged to a heart-disease indigo scrambled at a low office counter to grab a briefcase and a deactivated datasheet—"I have to go, I have to go"—his breath had almost escaped him—"I have to go, I have to go"—you got the idea.

"Hey, you're not leaving until I get my fourteen thousand!" Until Gabby was in the clear. With this new mystery, Hailie had forgotten to elongate her *s* sounds. She grabbed the viewscreen in both hands, her arms stretched uncomfortably since it spanned four feet. She examined the mongrel and owner. The mongrel was slobbering, trying to scratch an ear with his toes. And succeeding. Weird. No, entertaining. No, weird. "Who are those two?" The mongrel lost his balance and

knocked over more stanchions. No, entertaining.

“I don’t know, but if they know me by name, I’m not finding out.” Gaggard had collected his things and stutter-stepped to the other end of this back room. Dry skin fluttered off him.

“I’m trying to decide if these two need counseling or their own sitcom.” Hailie couldn’t tear herself away from the viewscreen. She inspected it from one corner to the next to the next, eyes darting with every buzz and flicker of badly rendered color. “I’ve decided on sitcom *but* the owner plays a counselor. Two birds with one stone. You’ll be the hilarious neighbor they avoid at all costs.” No comment from Gaggard. “Hello?” Something issued an electronic *whoomp*. She glanced up. Gaggard had bounded through an l-door on the opposite end of the room. No! Her last chance at Gabby’s money was escaping!

Hailie leered at the wall safe. She wanted to dive into those hamster tubes and create the greatest clattering opus livingkind had ever known. She left her dinner bag, her lasagna probably now a soup of ingredients, and dashed through the l-door after Gaggard.

She found a small elevator airfoil vestibule with one airfoil at the right and another l-door ahead. Gaggard slapped palms on the l-door, the computer cowgirl tsking at him. “Sorry, Entity Financial Advisor/Buckaroo Gaggard, this l-door is locked by order of the city of Pumpkin Rust ’cause o’ street construction. You’d be a varmint on a spit out there!” More skin

flakes sprinkled the carpet. “I also added vacuuming to my task list.”

“No no no”—apparently yes, yes, yes—“no *no no no no* NO NO.” Gaggard slapped his palms one final, insistent time, leaving flaky handprints. “Let me out!” He spun and collapsed against the door. He’d dropped his things on the concrete next to him and now had forgotten them. “There’s no way out. Except through them.” He nudged his spotted nose in the direction of the owner and his mongrel, who, from the sounds of the crashing, were doing a number on the clerk desk. The cowgirl blurted an “Ouch, that hurt like the dickens.”

Gaggard renewed his get-up-and-go. Literally. He grabbed his datasheet, briefcase forgotten, and jabbed past Hailie. “I need to find another way out.” He pounded to the l-door through which he’d entered this vestibule, but he didn’t exit. He shot back around and paced the gray vestibule, black Oxford shoes squeaking on the concrete, fist in mouth, deep in thought. “Where where where where?” Back and forth in front of Hailie.

“Can I see your pedometer?” Hailie shirked at another crash. “Calm down. Let’s hide in the safe. We’ll make the withdrawal and figure this out from there.”

“I can’t unlock the safe after hours.” Gaggard reached Hailie and grabbed her collar. “Help me. Get me away from them.”

“This is precisely the opposite of calming down.” Hailie chopped Gaggard’s hands off her collar. “I still have no idea

why they're here, and there's no way I'm finding out. They have such anger and phlegm. They've been here five minutes and already destroyed furniture thrice." Hailie screwed her eyes shut. "Crock, you've got *me* saying it."

Gaggard dashed back into the safe room. Hailie followed. "You have a hyperability, don't you?" Gaggard said. "Use it on them." Panic saliva dribbled from his mouth. He cringed against the wall safe. "Our only escape is through them."

Hailie slapped Gaggard. Not to bring him around. She just enjoyed it. It sizzled on her hand so satisfyingly. "Break a— Wow, that slap felt exhilarating." She paused a second to bask in the moment. "Okay, moving on." Too bad. "Break a window." Another crash. "Your poor, poor, ear-splitting haunt control is cringing."

"Break a window? I—"

Hailie slapped Gaggard again. *Very* exhilarating. "They hate furniture, not you. Don't make me slap you thrice." Embrace the word.

"Look, I'll talk to them, but you have to do something for me. Come with me." Hailie snatched Gaggard's datasheet. Leverage. Whatever it stored seemed crucial. She marched toward the l-door back into the safe room. As hilarious as the owner and mongrel's sitcom potential was, she'd hand Gaggard over and sneak out while they treated him like an unwanted table. But *after* she got her fourteen thousand. And maybe after she slapped Gaggard thrice.

"Give that back!" Gaggard clawed for the datasheet



Hailie held. He flopped onto the concrete and swiped at Hailie's shoes. He scrambled back to his feet, but Hailie had already reached the safe room with her wasted lasagna.

Gaggard leaped at her, careened onto her, tackled her to the carpet, all while scrabbling for the datasheet. Oh, it was on. This datasheet was hers until she discovered why Gaggard frenzied after it. But, oof, with Gaggard's heavy frame plowing on top of her, breathing was strained. She huffed out a strangled "Get off" but couldn't manage "Get your elbow out of my back" or "Your knee is breaking me in half."

Ice cream time. A flicker of thought served Gaggard a double-scoop of licorice and more licorice, the worst combination of flavors Hailie could concoct. Gaggard's struggles for the datasheet halted. He clutched his hairless scalp, almost dug his fingers into his skin, and rolled off her. Locked in a brain freeze, he couldn't speak, couldn't breathe, twitched in serrated throes. Hailie stood. "You finished? Can we act like adults now? Adults curled into tight balls? And wetting themselves again, from the looks of it?"

She released the brain freeze. Gaggard eased, hands still clutching his wrinkled blue scalp. Blinking, he shook to his knees, blurted a cough, and wiped drool onto his sleeve. "That was—"

"Painful? I know. Don't make me do it again. Or thrice. Now, I'll make you a deal." Hailie leaned closer for conspiratorial words. "I will brain-freeze them and lead you out if—if—you withdraw fourteen thousand moolahs and input it

into this device. It has ID-masking software, and I hear you're shady enough to make untraceable transactions." She produced from her pocket a cased device. An unsigned fund holder.

"I-I-I will-ll"—another disastrous smash, wood cracking like dry trees toppling—"but get rid of them." Gaggard snatched up the device. He powdered it with flecks of skin. Ew.

Relief exploded in Hailie like epic fireworks. Holy crock, a concrete-heavy load lifted off her shoulders. This was how Atlas must have felt during his lunchbreak. "Good. I'll go meet our guests. It would be impolite not to, and they might ease up on you if I brought them an old half-moon table." She grabbed her dinner bag—"Or maybe they're lasagna fans"—and marched toward the front foyer. Ooh. Coffeemaker by the wall. She grabbed a cup and tapped BREW.

"Leave the datasheet!" Gaggard lunged for Hailie again, but she sidestepped to avoid him. He smacked into a wall, jolted the coffeemaker, and bounced onto the floor again. The coffeemaker was toast. Crock. She sipped out the inch of coffee—strong—from the cup and dropped it on Gaggard. Maybe the droplets would moisten his skin.

"I'll be back in five minutes. I need to find out if they'll lend me a fork. Have my money ready."

Not sure what she was doing—in fact, she'd fire her survival instincts after this move—she nevertheless stepped into the foyer.

There they stood, owner and mongrel. More specifically, there he stood, owner, while there he hunched, mongrel. They

gawked at her, expecting who knew what. Wheezing, the owner clutched his stomach as if breathing brought pain. Around them laid the carnage of broken l-furniture that the haunt control still attempted to whisk away.

Hailie should have thought this through. She should have planned an opening line. She needed to say something. She needed to say *anything*. They were watching. “Hi.” Yeah, she should have thought this through.

“Where is Gaggard?” the owner said, voice ominous inside that megalithic armor. He issued a strained gasp, as though his windpipe were the width of a strand of hay. “We came for Gaggard.”

“He’ll be out once he finishes a small favor for me. Fair warning: he smells a weeeeeee bit like French roast.”

The owner stomped forward. “Bring us the one we seek. This one called Gaggard.”

Hailie’s heart launched a beat into her throat, but she had to put up a good front. She sucked in muggy air and wrung the datasheet in both hands. “If you want to maintain the intimidation angle, your mongrel should stop cleaning himself.” The mongrel blinked and stopped licking his wrist as if it were a forepaw. “Hang on a second. I’ll go get the one you seek, this one called Gaggard. But don’t break any more furniture, or we won’t have anywhere to sit.” Hailie stepped back—

The owner’s mask, still pulsing with light, fell on the datasheet Hailie held. “The datasheet. What does that contain?”

With fingernails yellow, teeth yellower, and eyes

yellowest, the mongrel snorted and licked his crosshatched lips. “Taint, I’ll get that datasheet, but please, give me a hit. Just one. It’s unbearable. I’m so cold.” He trembled. His hands shuffled around each other at his chest as if coveting his precious.

“The datasheet is secondary to our mission. And you will get your hit when we locate and treat Gaggard.” Taint revealed a syringe with a liquid whose color looked muted in the dark. Hopefully it contained a shot of aloe, because Gaggard needed a skin treatment.

“Now. Please. Nnnooooowwww. One hit would take away the jitters.” The mongrel practically crawled up Taint’s leg to grab at the syringe, but Taint held it high. The mongrel swatted for it.

“Is Taint a first name or last name?”

Taint tried to shake the mongrel off his leg before the humping began. His helmet angled up, as if he sniffed the air. “Are you a hyperperson?” More sniffing. And then blurring coughs. “Yes, you are. You have the gene. But it doesn’t poison you.”

“Ooh, let me pollute her.” The mongrel licked his chapped lips.

“No, not her. We don’t need to treat her.”

“Are you filling a gobbledygook quota?” Hailie got the sense she shouldn’t bring Gaggard out yet. He was a bargaining chip to get information on whatever party this sickly Taint and his mongrel had thrown here. Gaggard wasn’t going anywhere back there anyway, not if he was unwilling to break a window.

Or swan-dive off the roof.

“You don’t carry a poisoned hyperability. You aren’t our concern.” Taint trooped forward. He must not have been aware that the mongrel still clung to his leg like a knee-high sock. Taint lifted a hand the size of a superfan glove and heaved Hailie aside. The swing too much for this infirm knight, he stumbled and crunched the mongrel between his knee and a chair. Taint recovered. The mongrel...maybe did.

Hailie careened into a room divider. “Hey!” She bounced off, and her head hit a table. Her vision sparked with stars, her head sparked with pain. If her tongue had stuck out, she’d have bitten a chunk out of it. When she scrambled to her feet, she swept around to see Taint and his mongrel almost kick down the l-door leading to the back. The haunt control faded it out before he could send his boot crashing through it. Calamity Janet had learned her lesson from the furniture.

Hailie didn’t care about saving Gaggard. For whatever reason Taint and the mongrel—*finally a series title*—had come, Gaggard could go crock himself. She only needed the money before Taint reached him. And what was a poisoned hyperability? Did it make you poop different colors?

Hold on. She no longer held the datasheet. She glanced around. Where was it? Not under the table, not under the chair, not under her foot. In this room lit only by streetlamps, she couldn’t spot it. Wait. Taint. Taint had snatched it!

Hailie blurted through the l-door after that datasheet-snatching crocker and his comic relief. And there Taint stood,

at the end of the corridor, his mongrel still clutching that monolithic leg. “Please. All I need is oonnneeee hit, and I’ll be better. I feel so cold without it.” The mongrel caressed the leg up to the hip. The only hits Taint offered were knee-high-table ones.

Taint glanced around. A clamor from the left drove his attention, so he tramped tiredly toward the airfoil vestibule. Hailie followed, though she kept her distance from this war on legs. You couldn’t find better drama on the viewscreen. That was why she’d someday produce *Taint and the Mongrel*. For now, she wanted to find out what other furniture Taint would exact revenge on.

The airfoil activated with a loud *dong* and lifted Taint and his mongrel to the second floor. The top floor. Gaggard must have escaped up there. He’d better have Hailie’s money ready. Hailie trailed in after and peered up. Taint and the mongrel were gone, so she took her own ride up and found herself in a short hallway—about ten feet long—squeezed between doored walls. The right door was missing, so Taint must have passed through that way, whether the l-door had faded or he’d kicked it down.

Taint’s pomposity echoed out of that room. “Mr. Gaggard, we finally meet. You may have heard of us.” More winded wheezing. “I am Taint, and this is my pet, Bloodborne.”

Possible show themes jangling in her head, Hailie approached. Her fingers followed the right-side wall where a framed motivational poster hung. Who framed motivational posters? Hailie felt too indifferent to buy them, let alone fulfill

step two of the hanging process. Banking nerds. Can't live with them...aaannnddd the saying ended there.

Hailie overheard another voice, a new one. It should have sounded clear with the l-door missing, but the person faced away. And then another voice. Taint's. Hailie could tell from the reedy voice, still pompous like Hailie's math tea—Okay, Hailie needed to let go, but for the record, she blamed that teacher for the reason she and long division were bitter enemies.

Taint had found Gaggard, and lo and behold, the other three people he'd mentioned. So he wasn't lying. So what? Maybe Hailie was bitter enemies with truth recognition too.

Hailie peered through the wide entry of the l-door into a boardroom. A boardroom in a bank. Whatever. A meeting table, a dozen or so floating chairs, a window, a viewscreen for notation, and the ugliest color scheme south of a quilt. Including a flower motif. Maybe this bank had replaced a former daycare.

Gaggard and his coworkers knelt by the far wall facing Hailie, but they didn't see her. Did all bankers work after hours? Didn't they have families? Taint stood opposite, hand clutched at lungs, his mongrel heeled. Notably, all the furniture had so far survived. Taint had turned over a new leaf.

Hailie inched closer, her only sound a whisper of clothes. One of Gaggard's coworkers mewed in hysterics, a Terran dressed so starchily she looked like the schematic figure of banking: wrinkled skin; gray hair; pressed, ironed, and double-ironed pants; a button-up shirt so stiffly prim it would crackle apart in the laundry; shoes so squeaky clean that, not only could

you eat off them, you could eat them; and a posture you could use as a ruler. The others looked likewise, giving Hailie the impression they weren't coworkers but instead part of some banking suicide cult.

Hailie crouched at the door, fingers touching the frame, butt touching the maroon carpet, breath caught in her throat. Best vantage she could manage. The gray-haired woman wearing the shirt with the flexibility of a cracker shuddered. She kept glancing at the door, had spotted Hailie but hadn't registered her. Did she intend to make a break for it? Bad idea. Hailie would call her What Are You Thinking Woman, because *what are you thinking, woman?*

Now that Hailie had assessed the room, she could concentrate on Taint's words and understand them. They wouldn't be fluffy and cuddly words, though. Too bad. Hailie could use a pick-me-up.

"We have no business with you three," Taint said. "Do not interfere, and you will survive. We have come only to treat Gaggard for what is due."

Withering to tears, Gaggard collapsed to the carpet. Hailie got the sense Taint's treatment had nothing to do with Gaggard's skin condition. Crock. If this treatment meant killing Gaggard before Hailie's matter was resolved, she took issue. Afterward they could treat Gaggard to dinner for all she cared.

The mongrel snorted. "Taint, please...*please*. I need the hit now."

Taint looked worn. "Not until we treat our patient,



junkie. And clean the drool off your chin. Maintain an air of respect or no doggie biscuit at home.”

What Are You Thinking Woman took her chance—released her posture—dropped to the floor—crawled toward the door—Hailie was a poet and didn’t even know it—scurried under the table—Hailie ducked into the hall—back pressed against the wall—another poem—What Are You Thinking Woman appeared—Hailie heard Taint rear—crock, poeting thrice now—“Bloodborne, she must not escape”—What Are You Thinking Woman slipped on the carpet, half in the hallway, half in the boardroom—“Yes, Taint, and then, I get my hit?”—

What Are You Thinking Woman gasped, locked into a rigid arrangement of limbs. She couldn’t get back up, recover from her stumble. Her eyes blossomed wide, almost bugged out of her skull. Her breath oozed from her, and...she began shriveling? Her veins, already varicose and peeking out from her deflated skin, now pronounced themselves more, crawling up her cheeks. Her color evaporated until her complexion matched her hair. Blood and saliva foamed out her silently screaming mouth, skin shrank more against her bones, lips receded, gums receded, fingernails cracked. She looked like a plastic bag vacuumed of air. She was now What *Were* You Thinking Woman.

Holy crock, Hailie had picked the wrong night to dine at this bank. Didn’t even have wine service. Included a show, though.

“Oh, well.” Taint shrugged with words and posture,

though that posture straightened immediately. “Waste not, want not.”

Hailie couldn't see everything, but she did spot the shadow of Taint's arm against the flower-patterned wall. It clattered up, reached out...and then what looked like black energy, or chi, or powdered charcoal spiraled out of the emaciated corpse and into the air with a hiss. The corpse twitched, creaked into a taut arch, and floated three inches up, stark still, while the powder coalesced into a wind funnel and flew toward Taint. Taint inhaled the black energy dry—*inhaled*—with a perceptible slurp. And then a subtle burp.

“Aaaaaah.” Taint sighed, seemed invigorated, renewed, as though waking from a hundred-year nap. He'd stolen What Were You Thinking Woman's chi! That was going in the sitcom's theme song.

Taint's wheezing abated, his slouching straightened, the hand clutching at lungs formed a fist. He rounded his shoulders. Everything about Taint looked hale and formidable. That chi had cured his ailments. Finally ready for that job interview.

Taint faced the overhead light panels. He gave another triumphant “Aaaaahhhh” as if finally unleashing a queasy fart. Meanwhile, Hailie was left staring at the desiccated and gasping corpse of What Were You Thinking Woman, who now suffered a worse skin condition than Gaggard, who himself suffered a worse skin condition than mummies. What would Hailie tell What Were You Thinking Woman's grandkids? Nothing. That was what. Because facing off against high-tech knights who

hadn't gotten their flu shots was her limit, and she was out of here.

She swiveled on her heels, sore knees creaking, and—  
Crock.

The money. She needed that *tonight*. Without it, Gabby was dead, or if the shady loan sharks felt generous, back to kneecap breaking. Kneecap-replacement surgery probably cost fourteen thousand. The alternative was concrete shoes, and those didn't have memory foam.

With rehabilitated oomph, Taint cackled. "Now for you, Gaggard. Prepare for treatment."

She couldn't leave without witnessing Gaggard's treatment. She personally didn't give a crock about him—not *half* of one single crock—but Gaggard's treatment sounded fascinating and like the name of a sad charity. More important, Gabby's life depended on his survival. She gritted her teeth—*why why why why why*—she whacked a palm on her forehead—*leave, leave, leave, Hailie, get away*—her teeth shifted...

Gabby better appreciate this.

She stood, swiveled around, and inched into the flowery boardroom. A half-hearted wave trembled from her hand. So did an unconvincing smile that displayed all her teeth again, locked into a goofy show. Hot sweat drizzled her. It was how you presented yourself, right? "Howdy, pardners. Didn't mean to steal the cowgirl haunt control's line, but I have to ask—Taint, right?"—she pointed at Taint—"and Bloodborne?"—then at Bloodborne, the only person in the room who could

feasibly carry such a respectable and antiseptic name—“what exactly did Gaggard do to make you suck his great aunt dry?” Hailie indicated What Were You Thinking Woman’s husk, so withered that an arm snapped off. Better not replace that custodial staff yet.

“You again.” Taint slapped his forehead with a clang. “Why must you interfere?” A sniff. “And, again, is that odor hippopotamus feces?”

Hailie pounded a fist on the table. “That’s uncannily precise. Is your helmet equipped with a fecometer?”

“Taint, let me take her, pleeeeeaaaassssseeeee.” Bloodborne scabbled at Taint’s heel again, hopping like a dog snatching at a treat. He looked even more ashen and desperate. “I need a hit, I’ve behaved, I did what you asked, it’s been so long, give me one hit, I need my ear scratched.”

Taint stomped forward at Hailie, a hand outstretched—

“Nuh-uh, grumpy pants.” Hailie put fingers to her temple. Her signature action pose. “You know I have a hyperability, and it isn’t pleasant. If you take one step closer, I’ll use it. I’ve got an itchy trigger finger.” She smirked when Taint eased back. “Good. Now what’s your deal? Why are you intent on ruining Gaggard’s day? And if someone doesn’t clean up that corpse, it’ll attract flies.”

“You’ll wish you hadn’t interfered with Gaggard’s treatment.” Taint sneered his words at Hailie, facemask glinting in light that tinted it incandescent yellow. Wait. Hailie squinted and hunched forward.

Taint wasn't a him, but "you're a *her*?" Hailie stumbled back. Shock sparkled her nerves. "What's going on? Who exactly are you?"

"My name is unimportant."

"That's not what I meant, but we'll ride that train later. For now, I'm calling you Fun-Sucker McGoo."

"I don't wish to be Fun-Sucker McGoo."

"It's suitable and mature."

"Fine." Taint harrumphed with posture and mouth. "I am Dr. Lagarnak Preticel, hyperability practitioner."

Hailie rolled her lips around that bumpy name. Forget it. She had better things to do than tie up her tongue. "I prefer Fun-Sucker McGoo. You guys?" She regarded the three surviving bank geeks. They managed shaky nods with tensed necks and eyes wider than full moons. Well, Gaggard didn't. He was too rigid to consent.

"Bloodborne, our interloper. Please treat her. I wish to feed off her life."

The weasel who defined *ugly* for a new generation padded forward on two legs and one hand, slurping, "Yesssss."

That was it. Hailie let scream a brain freeze that floored Bloodborne. He writhed, clutching his hair-thin scalp, clucking short grunts, throwing his head back. His spine arched, legs extended out, ribs visible, hilarity up four notches.

Taint bellowed at the ceiling, stomped forward—

"No!" Hailie retreated to widen the gap Taint tried to close. Hailie's number-one rule was "Stay out of strangling

distance of the armor psycho,” and she would if it was the last thing she did. And it likely would be. “Tell me what Gaggard did to bring you here, either before or after you wring my neck.” She retreated another skittering step, back against the cold wall. “Or so help me, I will make you eat rum raisin.”

“What is rum raisin?”

“It’s the Hawaiian pizza of ice cream. Do you know who created rum raisin? No one does. That’s because the inventor is embarrassed to admit it. So *do not tempt me*, iron maiden.”

Taint looked perturbed. Or livid. Somewhere in the anger spectrum anyway, but Hailie couldn’t tell under that shaded faceplate. Taint reared at Gaggard, grabbed his head in her titanium glove, and wrenched him off the carpet—*no!* His feet kicked, his hands groped at Taint’s spatula fingers. Skin flakes rained.

“Careful! His head’s an egg in that thing you call a hand!” Hailie’s nerves sang out. She stumbled forward—had to get Gaggard out of there—but clambered into the table. Her hip blazed.

She speared Taint with a gasp of her hyperability, a sample taste of rum raisin. Taint flinched, but Hailie felt afraid to give her more, afraid Taint could reflexively crush Gaggard. Hailie kept her hyperability ready.

“Gaggard is responsible for hundreds of deaths through the use of his hyperability, and all for profit. He assassinated a starship of immigrants—families, *children*—paid by pundits to smear politicians.” In her other paw, Taint raised the datasheet

Gaggard had coveted. It flapped as she gestured with it. “The names of his victims are recorded here, six hundred and twelve lives he ended. This datasheet details information on the payment he received. It is the proof of his misdeed.”

Hailie could not believe this. She gawped at Gaggard, who hung limp, eyes creeping at Hailie, sweat crawling down his brow and probably down his butt crack. “You too? Seriously? Is everybody a hyperperson nowadays?”

One banker trembled up a hand. “I’m n-not.”

“That was rhetorical, suit-and-tie.” Hailie diverted back to Taint. “So he’s a despicable man. What do you care?”

Taint regarded Gaggard, squeezing a meager ounce tighter. Blood trickled down Gaggard’s ear, flakes rained down Gaggard’s other ear. Hailie clenched her teeth so tightly she almost snapped them apart. She responded with another spoonful of rum raisin, light on the raisin, heavy on the appalling aftertaste.

Taint buckled a twitch. “Do not repeat that, or I will end Gaggard and taste his lif—” Sniff, sniff. “Again, what is that smell? It’s all consuming.”

“Enough with the hippo dippo!” Hailie scraped her boot on the floor. “Wait to taste Gaggard’s life, or you’ll leave here with a slight aversion to unpopular ice-cream flavors.” Some threats were out of proportion. “So, now that we’ve established Gaggard is a killer and that I’m exactly sure you’re not here to treat his skin condition, what is that to you?”

“To answer that, let us rewind almost ninety years.”

Hailie groaned. Loudly and obnoxiously. “Oh, crock, a frigging life story. Should I grab a stiff drink for this?”

“I discovered my hyperability at twenty-three. I could extract lifeforce from people, but this left them dead. This compelled me to pursue an interest in hyperscience and hypermedicine, to cure instead of kill. I studied in university.” She tilted her head in a contrite shrug. “With a minor in juggling. Juggling comes second to me.”

“Juggling comes second to jugglers.” Hailie kept her fingers at her temple. Unnecessary, but a show so Taint knew she meant business.

“I graduated into a job as a social worker, helping drug abusers transition into normal life. That was until *this* despicable filth stepped into my shelter.” Taint regarded Bloodborne with a punt. Bloodborne yelped and then began licking her heel. “Bloodborne was saddled with the hyperability to poison the blood of anyone he chooses. High on rocket, a psychedelic hyperability accelerant, he poisoned everyone in my shelter. Including me.

“Apart from Bloodborne, I was the only survivor. I ended up in the hospital. Blood thinners and painkillers were my salvation. Doctors left me on life support in this thing.” With the hand holding the datasheet, Taint whacked the suit. “It keeps me alive, though barely. I’m still dying. Slowly. Lifeforce is the only thing that staves off my deterioration.

“With my hyperability weakened, I could now drain lifeforce from only those in deteriorated states.” She eyed What



Were You Thinking Woman's corpse. "I located Bloodborne, vowed to make him and others like him pay. I now force him to help me hunt those who misuse their hyperabilities. Such as Gaggard. I used to treat drug abusers. Now I treat hyperability abusers by sucking dry their lifeforce—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, terrible news, life story so tragic and stuff. You're overlooking one thing: I don't care about your lifeforce blabbity-blah-blah." Hailie thrust forward—*whap*—right, the desk didn't move on its own. "I need Gaggard, gross skin condition and all. Specifically, my sister needs money he promised me. After that, treat him to whatever you want. If you minored in juggling, toss him and four of his friends around. I don't care. But let me sort my business out first." Hailie's heart locked at the thought of Gaggard's head being crushed in that pompous knight's hand.

Taint coughed. A trickle of blood seeped out of her mouth. "I have not treated enough today. I need to feed off him to live." Indeed, under that faceplate, Taint looked grayer, darker, gaunter than a moment ago. Her eyes had sunken back into shadow. "Bloodborne, suck Gaggard dry."

Bloodborne licked his peeled lips. He slurped and concentrated. Saliva gurgled and foamed from Gaggard's mouth, eyes blanked—

"No!" Hailie twisted, launched an ice-cream attack at Bloodborne to heel him. He collapsed against the worn carpet, and Gaggard blinked back to life. Hailie put together pleading hands at Taint. "A few seconds. That's all I need to know if he

transferred funds into a device I gave him. It's my sister's last chance at keeping her kneecaps and her life. Would have been kneecaps, but yesterday we moved up." She stepped around the desk, her hip scolding her with a limp.

"Kneecaps mean nothing."

"Kneecaps mean everything! They help you kick soccer balls...and signposts when you're angry about missing your ride...and buckets—no, we try to avoid kicking the bucket. Let's strike that from the record." Hailie bopped her forehead with the heel of her wrist. "Look, I'm not eloquent, but kneecaps are the lifeblood of kicking."

The grit in Taint's expression gripped harder. Her hand gripped harder as well. Gaggard shuddered, dry skin drizzled, something cracked, this time not an elbow.

"No!" Hailie reached out.

"Gaggard is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people and possibly a few Virillians."

"Virillians should probably be people, too." Hailie marched past the two surviving bank nerds and rounded the table toward Taint. Her heart drummed into her throat. If Bloodborne recovered for even a second, Gaggard's lifeforce would spray all over this flowery room, and Taint would feast. That meant Gabby would die, for those in the audience not paying attention. "That's not the point, though. Gaggard will be responsible for my sister's death if you keep crushing him. So grip his head any harder, and I'll grip your head in all the rum raisin the universe can supply. You *don't* want that."

Taint tilted her faceplate into Hailie's personal space. "I—*enjoy*—rum."

"Then you're a pirate." Hand still to temple, Hailie shot her other hand out at Bloodborne in a chokehold. Bloodborne had recovered enough to stagger to the table and suspend himself from its edge by his forearms. Hailie thrust at him, gave him mercy with mint chocolate chip. Everyone liked mint chocolate chip. Bloodborne splayed out on the carpet again.

"Gaggard must pay. And I came to ensure he'll never again inflict death. I am here to save lives. It is my Hippocratic oath."

Hailie's gabber *bree-breeped*. What? *Now?* "Incoming connection from entity Evil Crockers." *Right now?*

Hailie threw her hands in the air. "Excuse me. I'm getting a call from some lowlifes with a nasty label in my contact list. Gabber, acknowledge. Accept connection." Her gabber sprouted an earpiece stem that arced along her scalp to her other ear. A mouthpiece stem zipped out an inch in front of her lips. "Not a good time. I'm in a stalemate with Iron Man." She reconsidered. "Iron Woman. Iron Ma—Look, the important takeaway is I'm stalemating."

"Greetings, Ms. MacReynolds," First Voice said, his pronunciation impeccable as always and scratching Hailie's backbone. His nasal arrogance roared through with panache. In the background, a transport hummed. "Tonight is the night. We brought a surprise guest, someone eager to talk to you." Hailie rolled her eyes. Just what she needed: Third Voice.

“Hailie?” A shuddering word, a tense utterance that rippled through Hailie’s insides. Gabby was Third Voice! But now was too early to fit her for concrete shoes! “They want their money.” Another racketing sob. “Now.”

“Gabby? What’s happening? What have they done to you?” Hailie’s hand found her mouth, sneaked behind the mouthpiece. Taint was forgotten. Gaggard was forgotten. Bloodborne was forgotten. The two bank nerds were forgotten. The ugly color scheme was—No, green on brown was unforgettable. Everything else washed away. Tears moistened Hailie’s words. “Whatever you do, don’t tell them your shoe size.”

Words wedged in Gabby’s throat, but they struggled out. “Th-they came to”—another gasp, another single sob—“to get me. I tried to hide, but they f-found me. I’m sorry.”

Hailie’s eyes seethed at Bloodborne and Taint. She breathed the words, “Put them back on the gabber.”

Shuffling. More shuffling. Even more—Hailie put up a just-a-second finger—shuffling. Finally, First Voice. “Ms. MacReynolds, your sister’s hanging by a thread out here.”

“Joke’s on you.” Hailie gasped a single hammy laugh. “She spends all her free time hanging by a thread.”

“You may hear the engine noise in the background.”

Hailie gulped. She found a window, inched her back to it while still covering Bloodborne. “Why are you in a transport?”

“Simple enough. We’re getting ready to dispose of any evidence. You see, we know a discrete little cliffside that looks

over some deep waters. We plan to let Gabby go for a swim.”

A tear trickled down Hailie. “No, you’ll get your money. I’m getting it right now! I just need twenty minutes—no, *ten*. Gimme ten minutes.”

“Good girl. We will call back in ten minutes. Until then, here’s a taste of how urgent the matter is.”

*A wrenching scream*, like thousands of dying souls, grating into Hailie’s ear. Hailie cringed, crouched to the floor, couldn’t stand. “Gabby? *Gabby!*” She cowered between her knees. The scream subsided—now heavy wheezing, whimpers, mews.

“We removed your sister’s fingernail,” First Voice said. “If we don’t get our money by one o’clock, guess what we’ll do to the rest.”

“Paint them?” Hailie wiped hot tears from her cheeks.

“Ten minutes. No later. We have guests coming for movie night.” *Click*. The conversation ended. Hailie’s gabber zipped back its mouthpiece and earpiece stems.

Hailie seethed. From her knees, she peered up at Taint, a red filter over her vision. “I don’t care how many non-Virillians Gaggard killed. Let—him—go!” She burst to her feet—opened fire with reviled flavors—at Bloodborne again—no mint chocolate chip, just garlic—everyone hated garlic ice cream—and again—pistachio—and again—vanilla—okay, not reviled, but her list was short, and vanilla was bereft of character at best, and she was a chocolate girl at heart and didn’t care for the way vanilla ice cream had turned into vanilla frozen dessert in recent years and—

“Bloodborne, quickly. Extract from her.” Taint held Gaggard high.

Bloodborne drooled everything inside him. “But Taint, please, I can’t take any more, and I hate ice cream now.”

“Extract from her! Feed me!”

Hailie thrust at Bloodborne again—a headache budding from overuse of her hyperability—she had to keep up—keep Bloodborne floored—more garlic—but Bloodborne found an opening—got Hailie—Hailie coughed—stopped...something seized her in...in what...Wh-what was...that feeling?

Blood fizzed, felt fiery. A moist fever encapsulated her forehead. Sweat flashed under her armpits. Her eyes rolled up. Something bubbled out her mouth. Saliva. Frothy. Coughing. What...was...happening? She dropped to the floor. Her veins felt like gas lines. Breath escaped her, sucked out of her lungs. She couldn’t...couldn’t breathe. She sensed out Bloodborne. Her lungs ached.

Rum raisin. One last thrust. Bloodborne collapsed. Hailie gurgled oxygen hungrily and racked out a coughing fit. Veins cooled. Eyes unlocked like twentieth-century blinds slapping open. Hands to throat. Wheezing. Gulping. Bloodborne collapsed again.

Hailie picked herself up off the rough carpet, a polar sensation along the inside of her throat, in her lungs. Wh... what...She panted out clouds of damp vapor with each breath. Like exhaling in winter. Condensation vapor? It dispersed. A creepy numbness tickled her skin.

Her thighs scorched. She stood on rickety legs. Panting, and more condensation vapor. She glanced at the two bank nerds. They'd crumpled to the ground, now mummy-cruste corpses like What Were You Thinking Woman. Their skin resembled dried layers of onion. Lifeforce twisted into the air, Taint sucking it in with a pleased sigh. Hailie caught contentment in her inhalation. She enjoyed this. Lifeforce was a delicacy to her. The witch!

Hailie's face flushed with wrath. She clutched her hand at Bloodborne. One more taste of garlic to keep that mongrel at bay. Then at Taint. She needed to be careful with this witch/doctor, keep her from crushing the brains out of Gaggard. A mild hit. Start with barbecue ice cream and climb the objectionable chain from there. She'd include jerk-chicken ice cream and, okay, admittedly, she grasped at straws, but ice cream had turned some flavors against humanity.

Taint lurched—she felt the brunt of barbecue—knees buckled—kept Gaggard aloft—hand smashed onto the table—braced herself—another thrust of barbecue pain—“T”—no time for words—Hailie slammed her again—she dropped to her knees—bit her upper lip—“T”—she still tried speaking—*again*—forehead gouged the table—

“Drop Gaggard.” Hailie allowed Taint a second's reprieve, watched her sputter and spray her faceplate in spittle. “*Now!*”

Taint twisted her eyes at Bloodborne, who writhed on the carpet. She reared her animosity at Hailie, blood leaking from a

chunk of her upper lip. “I no longer feel the need to treat Gaggard for his crimes.”

“Good.”

“I simply wish him dead.” Taint’s fingers closed. Gaggard’s skull closed with them.

“Nnnnoooo”—Hailie knifed Taint’s brain with every flavor inside her, an attack so vengeful she felt it herself—“oooo”—her headache detonated inside her, her nose bled—“ooooooooo!”

Taint plunged to the floor, crunched over Bloodborne. Both lay almost unconscious but definitely unable to react, empty eyes gawping at light panels. Gaggard’s ragdoll bag of flesh flopped into a chair and rolled onto the carpet, head a limp sheaf of skin and puzzle pieces. Hailie scurried under the table, up, slammed a boot down on Taint’s helmet—bad idea. Wrong shoes for that. Now she limped on both angry legs.

She shambled to Gaggard’s corpse, vision awash in waterworks, nose awash in sniffles. Her hands scurried into Gaggard’s pockets, and she found the device, and she checked it, and it still functioned, and she activated it, and it beeped like a bell toll that signified nothing—*nothing*—loaded on it. Gaggard hadn’t transferred anything. The useless bank pustule!

She clenched the device and cut her skin on its contours and plunged it down at Taint’s faceplate again and again and scratched the plate and cracked it and shattered it and hoped that walking life-support machine wasn’t insured.

Exhausted, more emotionally than physically though her



lungs blazed in an inferno of pain, Hailie sank against the wall. The gabber call came. She almost didn't answer. She couldn't. She *wouldn't*. She had to.

A shaky, lacerated hand almost tapped the ear bud, but she couldn't raise it high enough. She finally shook out, "Gabber, acknowledge. Accept connection." She swallowed, and all she could hear was the crinkle of saliva in her throat. And then the click of the connection coming through.

"Do we have our money?" First Voice didn't mince words. "Or our livestock?"

"Enough with the livestock." Second Voice clucked his tongue. "You're embarrassing me, but more important, you're embarrassing the whole loan-shark community."

"Let's hurry this up, Ms. MacReynolds. Our movie night looms closer."

It was funny how numb you felt when you reached the end of hope. Hailie popped out a grim laugh, condensation vapor choking out. "For soulless loan sharks, you guys sure keep a tight social life." She wiped tears with the heel of one wrist.

"Ms. MacReynolds, the money." First Voice's words sounded almost illegible over Gabby's screams, which made the numbness inside Hailie even number. Illegible? Unintelligible? Whatever the word was, Hailie felt cold. And it wasn't just her new icy breath.

Hailie gulped again. It crinkled. It would always crinkle. "I've got nothing." Inside the gabber, inside the middle of her head, she heard waves crash and crack. The cliffside. "Please let

Gabby go.”

First Voice tsked. “We needed the fourteen thousand, Ms. MacReynolds. We were going to build a shoe factory. But now we cannot. And, alas, our dream of designing the perfect basketball footwear dies with Gabby.”

The numbness in Hailie grew to an anesthetizing of emotion. Not even apathy. She’d gone way, way past that. Everything inside her became sedated. She heard every scream Gabby unleashed, and every scream dropped her emotion further. Whatever they were doing to her, it wasn’t just dropping her off a cliffside. Wet cracks, slushy thumps. It resonated.

And finally the drop: Gabby’s final scream sounded more and more distant, thinner, as she obviously fell into the crashing, foaming water below. They kept the gabber connection on, forced Hailie to listen. Hailie forced herself. Her numbness grew colder, deeper, hollower.

And when it was done, they didn’t even say goodbye. They just hung up.

Hailie stood. Zombielike, she stood. She didn’t even remember Taint and Bloodborne there. She just ambled out of the room. She rode the airfoil downstairs. She walked out of the bank. She walked home. It took hours, but she walked all the way home. She sat on her bed, staring at her room. At the cracked wall of her apartment, blinking, breathing. That whole time, she felt emptier than apathetic. Gabby. Gone.

And then she rose. She walked away. From life, Hailie walked away.

Fifteen years later she met Master Asinine, who thought she'd be a good fit for the Bad Guy sundae bar.



Want more? Course you do. These stories are like popcorn: what good is one handful?

Good thing there *is* more.

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